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Abstract

In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* the goddess, desperate to kindle fire in the unmoved Adonis, offers her body to him as if it were a prime piece of real estate.

'The Centrique Part': Theme and Image in Aritha van Herk's Novel *The Tent Peg*

In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* the goddess, desperate to kindle fire in the unmoved Adonis, offers her body to him as if it were a prime piece of real estate.

'Fondling,' she saith, 'since I have hemm'd thee here
Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry,
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

'Within this limit is relief enough,
Sweet bottom-grass, and high delightful plain,
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:
Then be my deer, since I am such a park,
No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.'

Landscape and the female body have been represented in terms of one another for so many centuries that, when we look at the great female nudes sculpted by Henry Moore, it seems fitting that anatomical and geographical contour should appear almost identical. Land has always been a precious and vital resource which, with proper management and control, can be made to yield harvests of food or mineral wealth; and in most western societies women have been regarded as a similarly valuable resource yielding both pleasure and profit to men. It is not surprising therefore that the language of cultivation and harvest should figure largely among traditional images for sexual intercourse. In medieval and renaissance times woman's body was generally equated with a garden securely walled around or hedged in. Sometimes it appeared pure and

inviolat — a *hortus conclusus* where the Virgin Mary suckled the Christ Child or sat *virgo inter virgines* among a cluster of female saints and martyrs — and sometimes it was an image of profane delight in Thomas Carew's 'A Rapture'.

I'll seize the Rose-buds in their perfum'd bed,
The Violet knots, like curious Mazes spread
O're all the garden, taste the ripned Cherry,
The warme, firme Apple, tipt with corall berry:
Then will I visit, with a wandring kisse,
The vale of Lillies, and the Bower of blisse:
And where the beauteous region doth divide
Into two milkie wayes, my lips shall slide
Downe those smooth Allies, wearing as I goe
A tract for lovers on the printed snow;
Thence climbing o're the swelling *Appenine*,
Retire into thy grove of Eglantine.¹

But the great surge of exploration which, for renaissance Europe, so greatly extended the boundaries of the known world, added a new dimension to these traditional images of garden landscape. John Donne in his eighteenth elegy 'Love's Progress' uses a wry parody of petrarchan imagery to chart the woman's body as a tract of unexplored and possibly dangerous territory, with every feature a navigational hazard. The lover's voyage is undertaken, like so many actual Elizabethan expeditions, in search of gold which can be found only by penetrating inland and probing the depths.

Search every spheare
And firmament, our *Cupid* is not there:
He's an infernal god and under ground,
With *Pluto* dwells, where gold and fire abound:
Men to such Gods, their sacrificing Coles
Did not in Altars lay, but pits and holes.
Although we see Celestial bodies move
Above the earth, the earth we Till and love:
So we her ayres contemplate, words and heart
And virtues; but we love the Centrique part.²

Exploration also involves appropriation, as the explorer not only gathers riches but takes possession of the new territory. In Donne's famous nineteenth elegy the speaker, contemplating his mistress's body, exclaims rapturously: 'O my America! my new-found-land', and then immediately considers the financial, constitutional and legal implications of his vision.

My kingdome safeliest when with one man man'd.
My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!
To enter in these bonds is to be free;
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.³

In view of such long-standing literary tradition, it seems natural enough to find a more recent poet, A.D. Hope, writing of Australia, a country which is still, from a European standpoint, relatively new, using the language of sexual appraisal.

She is the last of lands, the emptiest,
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
Still tender but within the womb is dry.⁴

But what kind of significance does the long-standing identification of landscape and female anatomy have for a woman reader, and, more importantly, in what ways can a woman writer avail herself of this rich store of literary images? The Canadian writer Aritha van Herk in her novel *The Tent Peg* adapts this tradition in a very individual and interesting way. The book is set in a geological survey camp in the Yukon mountains where the crew spend a summer prospecting for uranium. The landscape in which they work is so formidable and uncompromising that the Englishman on the team, Hudson, is appalled by its dangerousness and air of barren desolation.

And these mountains. Bare, gray, no trees, no grass. They surround you, they press you down, they laugh at you like teeth. It's almost June and they are still snow-covered.⁵

The novel begins with a helicopter flight across the tundra just as the winter ice begins to melt creating a confusing and hazardous pattern of white snow and black water: 'Skull teeth gleam through an invitation; the tundra can both restore and maim.' Although the landscape perpetually shifts and changes, Mackenzie, the leader of the survey team, regards this as part of its fascination and challenge: 'It's that kind of country, changes her mind the minute your back is turned. I like the fickleness; it keeps you guessing' (p.11).

In their survey work the geologists depend upon the maps they bring with them, but these prove an uncertain guide. Only first-hand experience of the formations and contours, which for an office geologist are little more than lines on paper, will make discovery possible, and whether even such direct experience will yield anything depends on the character

and temperament of the observer. The map must constantly be adapted to the shifts and changes in the land it charts. Mackenzie knows this. Long years of practical field experience, together with an intuitive sense of rock and landscape, make him aware that the team is unlikely to find commercially viable uranium deposits in the area where the mining company has sent them, but his openness and awareness enable him to seek out what else may be there. For his second in command, Jerome, on the other hand, the company's directive means the area has to yield uranium. To him the map represents immutable truth, providing a set of rules and directions within which he can confine his own activity and which he tries to impose on others.

Mapping is a central image in the novel both for the way an individual perceives experience and for the ways in which human beings relate to one another. Several of the characters project their own notions of how the world should be onto the harsh Yukon landscape. Hudson compares it to England: '...the geology here is unreal, so complex it's almost impossible to figure out. The age references do nothing but confuse me. These rocks have mineral compositions that I've never seen in England' (p.103). In his eyes the social relationships between the members of the survey team appear savage and barbarous, completely out of harmony with what he regards as the more civilized standards of his own country. Milton, the young Mennonite farm boy, who has always lived in close contact with the earth, finds the soil on the Yukon mountains totally unfamiliar to what he knows on the prairie: 'What can they tell from dirt? Thompson says it's geochemical analysis, but it's only dirt. Grainy and dry, not like the topsoil at home, the way it smells cool and dark when you turn it up behind the discer' (p.101). His deeply and narrowly religious view of life is affronted by the behaviour of his team-mates whom he considers godless and licentious. Another geologist, Franklin, uses meditation and poetry to map his world. He believes the mountains are good for his karma and that geology is a way to seek out the wilderness. His colleague, Hearne, tries to make sense of experience by taking photographs, hoping always to catch the perfect picture.

As the summer passes, the various members of the team are forced to modify their personal maps of the world. This is largely due to the presence of the camp cook, J.L. who has applied by letter for the job using the anonymity of initials to obscure her sex, since most survey expeditions are unwilling to hire a woman. She is, however, disconcerted to find that, on their first meeting, Mackenzie genuinely mistakes her for a boy so that she actually has to inform him of the truth. The confusion of identity is partly a comment on how Mackenzie in his personal life has

lost touch with the whole world of relationships between men and women; but it also relates to the theme of transformation which pervades the novel, and it points to the way in which J.L. with her flat-chested androgynous body assumes the shifting, illusive quality of the land itself. Her bony figure resembles the contours of the bare Yukon landscape and her character proves equally indomitable. Each of the nine men on the team responds to J.L. in his own way, finding her an enigma, a source of anxiety, an object of lust or hatred. Some believe she offers them a key to their own lives. Hearne is sure she will be the subject of his perfect picture, and Franklin sees her as an inspiration for his poetry and meditation. Most of them, without quite realising it, spend their time trying to map J.L. just as they map the land they are prospecting, a situation she finds exasperating: 'I'm tired of being weighed and watched and judged and found wanting every minute of the day. I thought I could be alone here. Instead, I find I'm less alone than I've ever been. Here I'm everyone's property. I belong to everyone of these men' (p.106). Gradually most of the men come to regard her as their focus, a figure of potency and inspiration, a source of brightness, light and warmth: 'She centers this whole summer for us.' But for J.L. the emotional pressures are enormous, and the effort of maintaining her separateness and independence extreme.

In a central episode of the novel, the camp is visited by a grizzly bear with her cubs in tow, and two of the crew watch in terror and amazement as J.L. and the bear stand only a few feet apart apparently conversing: 'J.L.'s face is tilted up and the she-bear's face is tilted down and they're looking at each other like they've met before. And then J.L. sweeps off her hat and bows at the same instant that the bear seems to shrug and drop to its feet' (p.108). Immediately before the bear appears, J.L. has been crudely propositioned by Cap, the communications man and general factotum in the camp who considers all women his prey. When she rejects him: 'Cap if you're goddam horny, go find yourself a grizzly bear', he abuses her with obscene vituperation which leaves her feeling defeated and despairing. Later in the book, as they all sit round the fire one night, J.L. tells the legend of Io beloved by Zeus and transformed into a heifer to foil the suspicions of his wife Hera: 'Imagine being turned from a beautiful young woman into a cow, feeling yourself a haired and hooped and horned beast simply because of the intemperate lust of a god. Inside her beast's form she must have mourned, she must have lowed and kicked in resentment' (p.154). Here the myth becomes a parable of the way men so frequently perceive women merely as animals to mate with. Io could resume human shape only when Zeus gave her up: 'Ironical that

he was only allowed to love her when she was a heifer.' But, in total contrast to Io, the grizzly bear represents a kind of furious and demonic female power arising from the ground itself. For J.L. it becomes a vision of her friend Deborah, a singer whose beauty has made her especially vulnerable to male arrogance and insensitivity, and as she faces the bear she recognizes that her love for Deborah is a principal source of strength and energy in her own life. Through this vision she summons the power to persist and endure in her present situation.

As the novel develops, J.L. is increasingly associated with the force and energy of the earth. When, one night, a substantial portion of the mountain above the camp collapses in a rock slide, missing the tents by a few yards, J.L. alone hears and sees what happens while the men sleep through it all: 'Men with no ears, men with no connection to the earth.' The slide is yet another sign of the shifting, changeable quality of the landscape and its inherent danger — a danger with which J.L. is identified, but which she may in some mysterious way even have power to avert or transform. One of the geologists, Thompson, reflects: 'And maybe she is magic, maybe she did invoke that mountain down on us. Then again, maybe she stopped it, maybe she stood in its tracks so it couldn't reach us. It's possible' (p.126). The rock slide is also associated with the way people in their personal lives may suddenly find the ground shift under their feet. Throughout the summer, Mackenzie is haunted by the memory of his wife who had left him ten years before without a word of warning, and the rock slide represents for him the moment when he begins to see the situation from her point of view, asking for the first time what her reasons for leaving may have been. Mackenzie and Thompson, the two members of the expedition most open to experience and more acutely observant than the others, take crucial decisions about their own lives, guided by J.L. Mackenzie finally accepts that his wife has gone for good and that he is not entitled even to try and bring her back, while Thompson, torn between his work which takes him away from the city for long periods and his love for Katie, a professional dancer, accepts, with some pain, that he must be prepared to spend his life in perpetual balance between the two, happy if Katie remains with him, but knowing that he must never expect to possess or claim her. Such moments of self-recognition are a form of exploration and discovery paralleling the survey for mineral wealth to which the team devote their working hours.

As Mackenzie predicted, the survey area yields little uranium, but with hard work, and against all odds, he and Thompson find substantial gold deposits. Claims must then be staked, and the act of staking becomes an image of putting one's personal mark on what is achieved and dis-

covered: 'I still get that prickly in my blood when I think of staking what I know is a good property, hammering it into two post markings so that you know it's yours, you've got it' (p.163). Because the law permits only eight claims per person, claims must also be staked in J.L.'s name if the team is to acquire the maximum amount of territory. She insists on doing this herself, and it is then that Hearne finally takes his perfect picture of her 'standing over that stake, leaning herself and the hammer into the ground until she becomes a movement of striking, driving that post deep into the temple of the earth, driving it smooth and sure and knowing absolutely where it will go' (p.210). This passage is crucial to the whole scheme of the novel, for staking not only marks ownership, but symbolises penetration of the underlying depths in order to release what is contained there. For J.L.'s true name is Jael, and she is identified with her old testament counterpart who, during a conflict between the forces of Israel and Canaan, killed the Canaanite captain Sisera when he sought refuge in her husband's tent by driving a tent peg through his temple, nailing him to the ground as he slept. In this way she delivered Israel from one of its principal enemies and her action was celebrated in a song of praise by the prophetess Deborah.⁶ The motif of piercing the temple recurs many times in the novel. Milton assures his sceptical tent-mate Hudson that 'The body is the temple of the spirit', but J.L. interprets the word temple rather more precisely:

And only a man would have the nerve to connect himself with God, to name a part of his very anatomy after a place of worship. The forehead of a man is the seat of wisdom, the place of being, the center of thought. How many of them have we seen posed, head ostentatiously propped on a fist. And temple it is, they worship themselves as intently as we poor females have never dared. Worship their own intellectual capacity when it is (if they only stopped to consider the danger) no larger than ours. (p.172)

By her presence and behaviour J.L. breaks open the sleeping temples one by one penetrating the complacency of her companions to create a new awareness and self-knowledge. What in the old testament story is a deed of savage cruelty is here transformed into a redemptive act.

But one member of the team, Jerome, is beyond redemption. Preoccupied with notions of power, hierarchy and authority, he antagonizes everyone, and as the summer progresses, becomes increasingly alienated, blaming this on the presence of a woman in the camp. For him geology is a male preserve with which no woman should be associated, even in the menial role of cook. J.L. perceives him as a constant threat which she must always guard against, since Jerome believes authority can be main-

tained only through aggression, and for him the assertion of sexual dominance — a vital prop to his self-esteem — becomes an act of predatory violence: 'If he can't shoot it or fuck it, he's not interested.' His hatred of J.L. is expressed in images which relate it to the story of Jael and Sisera: 'It's time someone started nailing her down. She gets away with murder.' When, towards the end of the novel, he realises that he has failed to undermine Mackenzie's authority and establish himself as the true leader of the survey team, as he had originally hoped, he falls into a state of crazy paranoia. He goes to J.L.'s tent late at night, and, in a gesture which echoes Jael driving the tent peg into Sisera's temple, points a gun at her head, forcing her out of her sleeping bag in an attempt to rape her. But, as J.L. later comments, he is 'not very good at handling a woman and a gun at the same time', and in the ensuing struggle she gets hold of the gun. The episode ends with Jerome utterly vanquished and humiliated.

Although this is an important victory, what Jerome represents is only temporarily defeated and will continue to exert its menace. J.L. emerges triumphant from her summer experience having evoked admiration, affection and even reverence from men who initially regarded her with resentment, suspicion or amusement. For some of them she has even taken on a kind of mythic quality. But this mythologizing, although an important aspect of the way J.L. is presented in the novel, appears very differently from her point of view. As cook she is associated with images of abundance, nourishment and nurturance, but this involves her in hours of tedious drudgery: 'By the end of the summer I will have washed more plates than I have in my entire life. I didn't count on that. I thought only of the making, the creating, the cooking. And discover that I will spend more time washing dishes than I ever will cooking' (p.60). The demands the men in the camp make upon her sympathy and understanding also cost her great effort: 'They suck at me like quicksand but I have to listen.'

At the end of the summer when all the impedimenta of the camp is being burnt before the return to city life, J.L. leaps on the table where she has previously cooked and dances on it as it stands above the fire: 'And I lift up my arms and I whirl, the skirt heavy around my thighs, dance for them until the table shivers. Whirl and kick in the ecstasy of the flames beneath me, devouring the summer under my feet' (p.225). The dance here retains its ancient and traditional significance as an image of cosmic order and harmony, but it is also, in the course of the novel, associated with flying. The camp has its own helicopter to take the geologists to the different survey areas, and for several of the characters,

J.L. included, flying becomes an exciting and liberating experience. Thompson associates it with his love for the dancer Katie: 'And we're flying, flying over mountains bleak and gray and suddenly the flying turns into Katie dancing, her body caught in mid-air, in a double turn, suspended — flying' (p.141). But flying, especially in the Yukon, although exhilarating, can be extremely dangerous, and Ivan the helicopter pilot is haunted by the fear of crashing. At the end of the novel J.L. must time her dance so that she can leap safely from the table just before it collapses into the flames. In order to dance she must remain precariously aloft maintaining her poise and balance despite the various hazards which threaten to engulf her, so that the final dance becomes a symbol of the difficult balance she has so triumphantly maintained throughout the summer.

Aritha van Herk has absorbed into *The Tent Peg* traditional literary associations between geographical and sexual exploration culminating in the discovery of buried treasure. But she rejects the image of a passive landscape charted, penetrated and appropriated by male discovery. In this novel the land shifts and changes and will yield up her treasure only to those who are prepared to observe and respond to her movements. Images of exploration and discovery are also applied to relationships between men and women. The men in the novel believe it is for them to define and delineate their relationship with the woman in their midst, only to find that in the process they themselves are penetrated and laid open, for the successful discovery of new territory must inevitably involve a process of self-discovery.

NOTES

1. 'A Rapture', ll.63-74, *The Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Rhodes Dunlop (Oxford, 1949).
2. 'Elegie XVIII', ll.27-36, *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson (Oxford, 1912).
3. 'Elegie XIX', ll.28-34.
4. A.D. Hope, 'Australia' in *Collected Poems* (London, 1966).
5. Aritha van Herk, *The Tent Peg* (Seal Books, Toronto, 1982), p.66. Subsequent references will be in brackets immediately following quotations.
6. The story is found in *Judges*, chapters 4 and 5.